



المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير
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Oral Intervention / Statement

**For the pre-session of the Universal Periodic Review of the Syrian Arab Republic
40th Session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (January-February 2022)**

Submitted by: The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), a non-governmental organization with special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council

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At the end of the Second cycle of the Syrian Arab Republic's UPR, the Syrian Government did not support many key recommendations including those recommending the ratification of the Optional Protocols to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention Against Torture; ceasing the practices of widespread use of torture, enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention; releasing all those who are arbitrarily detained; allowing in independent observers and immediately releasing all prisoners of conscience; putting an end to attacks on civilians and granting unfettered access to humanitarian organizations and independent international human rights monitors, particularly the Commission of Inquiry; and allowing independent international monitoring bodies unconditional access to detention facilities in order to perform their functions.

The illegal use of chemical weapons and other internationally prohibited weapons

On 4 April 2017, in the deadliest use of chemical weapons in Syria since August 2013, over 83 people were killed, including 28 children, and over 293 people were reported to have been injured by a confirmed sarin gas attack carried out by the Syrian Government on the northern rebel-held area of Khan Shaykhun, Idlib Province. On 8 April 2020, the investigation and identification team (IIT) of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) released its first report, which was based on a strict methodology of analysis and a multitude of evidence. This report indicated the responsibility of the Syrian Air Force for three incidents in which chemical weapons were used in Syria on 24, 25 and 30 March 2017. In two of these incidents, the Syrian Air Force used Sarin gas, while in the third it committed a double crime by bombing a hospital in the northern countryside of Hama with a munition loaded with chlorine, killing a doctor and injuring thirty people.

Mercenaries

The humanitarian suffering that resulted from the ongoing conflict across Syria makes mercenaryism an attractive option for financial gain for many young Syrians who have grown up in conditions of extended war and displacement. The financial desperation among young people and their families has driven many individuals to enlist for combat abroad. The So-called Private Military Company (PMC) Wagner is suspected of committing serious crimes in Syria including torture and extrajudicial killings.



The recruitment of Syrian mercenaries to fight in Libya and Azerbaijan was widely reported in 2019-2020. The Wagner Group also coordinated with the Syrian government to bring in thousands of Syrian soldiers to help the Russian-backed Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army to confront Turkey and its Libyan allies.

Extrajudicial killing; Arbitrary detention; Torture and ill-treatment; Enforced disappearance

Since 2016, the Syrian government has pursued a policy of arbitrary arrest and detention, kidnapping, torture, extrajudicial killing, enforced disappearance, sexual and gender-based violence, and field trials. The Syrian government justifies these grave breaches under the threat of "fighting terrorism", in order to continue to evade fulfilling its obligations arising from international human rights conventions, and to justify its grave and systematic violations that amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In late 2013, a Syrian military photographer named Caesar defected from Syrian government forces after smuggling thousands of pictures of people allegedly killed under torture and ill-treatment in government prisons after being arbitrarily detained and subjected to enforced disappearance. In 2015, a Syrian NGO posted more than 6000 pictures of the bodies of victims who are believed to have been killed under torture between March 2011 and August 2013 in the governments' prisons and unknown detention centers without any records of the victims. The families of these victims have not been informed of the whereabouts, or fate, of their loved ones.

Although hostilities have subsided in many areas of Syria since 2018, Syria remains an unsafe country for the return of refugees. Despite the grave violations that returnees are subjected to, and the tragic economic and humanitarian reality that awaits them in Syria, the countries surrounding Syria and many European countries continue to promote the return of Syrians to their country. Denmark set a dangerous precedent by revoking the status of "temporary protection" for people coming from Damascus and its countryside, depriving them of temporary protection legally, and giving them the choice between living in return centers or returning to Syria. However, a growing number of Syrian refugees returned home from countries including Germany, Sweden and Denmark, for reasons including family reunification, applications being rejected and problems integrating in their host countries. Human rights reports confirmed the conduct of security prosecutions against the returnees, more than 2000 arrests of refugees returning to Syria as well as more than twenty cases of murder under torture, some of whom were children.

Violations against the media and freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association

The Syrian government suppresses freedom of expression and media professionals and the right to peaceful assembly and association, and is considered one of the deadliest countries for media professionals. The collected data by the SCM team in Syria has revealed that, between 15 March 2011 and the end of December 2020, 1670 violations against the media and media personnel were reported. The Syrian Government topped the list of perpetrators of such violations, with a total 778 violations attributable to governmental authorities. Moreover, it is also notable that 70 violations were committed against female journalists. In addition to these violations, the SCM has documented 720



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extrajudicial killings, 434 arbitrary detentions, 140 enforced disappearances and abductions, 61 attacks on media headquarters, 222 injuries by direct and indirect targeting, 40 physical and verbal abuse, and 24 attempts to prevent media coverage.

Gender-based violence and discrimination

Syrian government practices gender-based violence by resorting to arbitrary arrest and detention of women, and subjecting them to various forms of torture, humiliation, and enforced disappearance. They were also used as bargaining chips to blackmail their men and family members. Detained pregnant women or those detained with their children suffered the most due to the dire conditions of detention, lack of sanitary products, denial of children's needs, inadequate quantity and quality of food, low level of hygiene and access to reproductive and medical care. Women who have been released continue to suffer social, economic and psychological effects of their detention, including the social stigma that can lead to divorce, ostracism from the family and society, exclusion from education and dismissal from work.